

## **MOUNT STIRLING WILDERNESS STUDY AREA**

### **1. THE STUDY AREA - 69,650 acres**

Mount Stirling Wilderness Study Area (WSA) (NV-050-401) is located 45 miles west of Las Vegas, Nevada, in Clark and Nye Counties. Encompassing the northern most portion of the Spring Mountain Range, the WSA contains 69,650 acres of Forest Service and BLM lands with no split estate or private inholdings. The northwest corner of the WSA adjoins six 40 to 80 acre parcels of private land. From this point going south the boundary follows the base of the range where at the southwest corner the boundary adjoins one parcel of private land. The south-southeast boundary runs along the Wheeler Wash Road and over Wheeler Pass. From Wheeler Wash Road the eastern boundary heads north following major topographic features and contour lines. The northern boundary runs through the bajada to the base of the mountain range. One major cherrystem road extends two and one-half miles into the WSA from the southern border, in the vicinity of Wheeler Well.

The National Forest and Public Lands of Nevada Enhancement Act (Public Law 100-790) adjusted the administrative boundaries for the Toiyabe National Forest, Placing approximately 91 percent of the Mount Stirling WSA within the new Forest boundary.

### **2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE -**

**50,682 acres recommended for wilderness<sup>1</sup>**

**19,050 acres recommended for nonwilderness**

The recommendation is to designate 50,682 acres as wilderness allowing for the construction of two miles of access road across the northeastern portion of the WSA. A total of 19,050 acres would be released for uses other than wilderness. The 50,682 acre area is recommended for wilderness designation because it is natural and provides outstanding opportunities for both solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation.

The area is manageable as wilderness, due primarily to the extreme rugged terrain, dense vegetation and its relative inaccessibility to off-highway vehicles (OHV). Portions of the recommended area may be difficult to manage where the terrain and vegetation is less restrictive, thus providing some limited access for unauthorized OHV use. Such areas would be limited to the periphery and possibly along portions of the road projected for development through the recommended area's northeast corner.

Conflicts with minerals exists within the northern and western portions of the recommended area, where mining claims are located. No mineral resources have been identified, but there is a high mineral resource potential for undiscovered deposits of gold along the northern and western boundaries.

Grazing use of the area will be allowed to continue in accordance with management plans and allotment management objectives. Removal of pinyon-juniper as a wildlife management tool for developing elk habitat would not take place within the recommended area. Interpretative signing of the Wood Canyon Rock Art area, proposed as a management tool for cultural resources, would not be implemented within the area recommended for wilderness.

The 19,050 acres recommended for nonwilderness are comprised of five parcels located on the periphery of the WSA. These parcels are recommended for nonwilderness in order to reduce some of the resource conflicts presently occurring and projected to occur. These areas also offer less than quality wilderness values of solitude and primitive recreational opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup>Includes 82 acres exterior to the WSA boundary for management purposes.

Adjustments to the WSA's north-northwest borders established a boundary that is more definable and easily locatable for visitors utilizing the area. The northern portion of the WSA, not recommended for wilderness, would remain available for mineral exploration in an area that has a high mineral resource potential for gold. Conflicts with mineral resources within the northern portion of the WSA would be reduced by the recommendation of nonwilderness for this area. Conflicts between OHV use and wilderness would be reduced as the area would remain open to OHVs. Where terrain and vegetation does not restrict access, visitors are able to pursue motorized types of recreation.

The northeastern lobe extends into a bajada that is easily accessible to OHVs. This portion of the WSA would remain available to visitors for motorized types of recreational pursuits.

The southern area, encompassing Wheeler Well and the charcoal kilns, is heavily used by OHVs and nondesignation would allow its continuation. In addition, projected development of a semi-primitive campground could be constructed within this area. Development of recreational facilities would help to meet the needs and demand placed on the area's recreational resources by the rapidly increasing population of Clark County.

Exploration of existing mining claims and the development of potential mineral resources is projected to occur within the southern area. Nondesignation of this portion of the WSA would reduce possible conflicts between wilderness and the development of potential mineral resources.

### **3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS**

**A. Naturalness:** The 50,682 acres recommended for wilderness are predominately natural.. There are nine developed springs located along the area's periphery and are visible within their immediate vicinities. Two and one-half miles of ways are located within the northern portion of the recommended area and are substantially screened due to abundant tree cover. A terraced burned area east of Wheeler Peak is distinctly visible from the peak and along the southeastern boundary.

Outside influences, that directly affect the recommended area's naturalness, consists of four cherrystem roads which cut into the southern boundary, but vegetative cover limits their overall influence. The roads do allow minimal vehicle access into the area recommended for nondesignation.

Within the area recommended for nondesignation, two corrals and one developed spring are located along the northern boundary road. One way extends from the southern boundary into the area's central drainage. A portion of the terraced burn occupies the southeast section of the area. Overall influence of human imprints on naturalness of the area, as perceived by the average visitor, is negligible.

**B. Solitude:** Within the area recommended for wilderness outstanding opportunities for solitude exist. Canyons and ridges and the heavy forest cover provides excellent screening and secluded locations.

Within the area not recommended for wilderness, numerous opportunities for solitude exist, but not to an outstanding degree.

**C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation:** The area recommended for wilderness contains outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreational experiences. Most of the area allows freedom of movement due to numerous drainages, hills, rock outcroppings and forest cover. Wheeler Peak and Mount Stirling provide scenic vistas of the area and surrounding valleys. Rugged landscapes provides challenging routes and destinations for hikers and backpackers. Visitors to the area would have opportunities to view and study diverse wildlife species. Marine paleozoic fossiliferous formations, two large petroglyph sites and remnants of a campsite and pine nut milling site provide visitors a visible look at the area's geologic and cultural history.

Few primitive recreational opportunities exist within the area recommended for nonwilderness. Visitors could utilize a limited portion of the area for hiking and camping which provide few interesting features and challenges.

**D. Special Features:** The area recommended for designation contains one of the most complete sections of marine paleozoic fossiliferous formations in Nevada, two large petroglyph sites, a cultural site which may have been used for pine nut milling, and a site with rock circles which may be the remnants of an encampment. Three charcoal kilns, which have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places, are located within the portion of the WSA recommended for nonwilderness. In addition, the WSA constitutes part of the habitat of the only elk herd in Clark County.

#### **4. MANAGEABILITY**

Mount Stirling WSA can reasonably be managed as wilderness to preserve values present. The area is a solid block of public land with no private inholdings, state lands or rights-of-way. There are 17 existing mining claims located within the WSA, however valid rights have not been identified. Under wilderness designation, unauthorized cross-country vehicle use would be difficult to manage within those portions of the WSA where the terrain does not restrict access. This would apply primarily to the periphery of the area and along the cherrystemmed roads.

#### **5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES**

There is a high resource potential for gold along the Grapevine fault system and along the northern border at Gold Spring. The area south of Big Timber Spring has an unknown mineral resource potential for gold along a poorly exposed normal fault system. No identified resources were found within the recommended area. Seventeen mining claims were located within the WSA. No oil, gas or geothermal leases exist.

#### **6. SUMMARY OF WSA SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS**

There were 40 comments received. In general, 36 commentors supported wilderness designation for all or part of the WSA, and four commentors supported no wilderness.

Most comments which specifically mentioned the WSA touch on high wilderness values, unspoiled biological and cultural resource values, wildlife habitat potential for Elk, and the benefits Mt. Stirling peak provides to the WSA. Comments opposing wilderness centered around potential mineral resource values and potential mineral exploration/development of the WSA.

The Clark County Department of Comprehensive Planning generally agreed with the recommended wilderness designations contained within the Preferred Alternative in the Clark Draft EIS.

The Governor of Nevada supported the Bureaus's Preferred Alternative. Previous comment letters received from the State agencies did not support the Bureau's Preferred Alternative.

The U.S. Forest Service proposed boundary changes to the Mount Stirling Preferred Alternative in the Final EIS. The change would allow for the construction of a road through the area recommended for wilderness designation, the deletion of Wheeler Peak and the inclusion of Mount Stirling Peak. The U.S. Air Force stated they support alternatives that do not restrict military overflights. The U.S. Geological Survey stated that geologic conditions were adequately considered in the Draft EIS and that mineral resource potential of those areas recommended for wilderness would be addressed in their joint report with the Bureau of Mines. The EPA supported the proposed action and recommended that the final recommendation include a statement that water and air quality will be best protected under wilderness designation.

